

Isaiah 42:1–9

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1 Introduction

In the face of an oppressive empire, Israel is called once again to be a servant of God. What does her vocation entail? The passage Isaiah 42:1–9 shall give us the answer.

2 The Servant Songs

Isaiah 42:1–4 is the first of four passages that Isaianic scholars called the *Servant Songs*:

The Servant Songs		
First Song	42:1–4	<i>A bruised reed he will not break ...</i>
Second Song	49:1–6	<i>I will also make you a light for the Gentiles ...</i>
Third Song	50:4–9	<i>Who then will bring charges against me ...</i>
Fourth Song	52:13–53:12	<i>And by his wounds we are healed ...</i>

While the first and the fourth Servant Songs both begin with the formula “Behold, my servant ...,” the other two share similar language usage and contents with the first and the fourth. Isaianic scholars have come to recognize that this collection of songs have a distinct literary purpose in the context of 2 Isaiah, and may very well refer to a distinct “Servant of the Lord.” The question is, who is this servant?

The question is at least as old as the Christian Church herself. Acts 8:26–40 tells us the story of an Ethiopian eunuch raising exactly this question. In an encounter with Philip, the eunuch expressed his puzzle about the identity of the suffering servant in the Fourth Servant Song (specifically, in Isaiah 53:7–8): “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” In response to the question Philip “told him the good news about Jesus,” thereby leading the eunuch to Christ.

This incident illustrates at least two important points about the interpretation of the Servant Songs — one that is more obvious, while the other not so obvious. First, both the historical church and the Lord himself unanimously see in the person and ministry of Jesus the fulfillment of the words of the Servant Songs. They find in the Servant Songs the perfect articulation of the nature of the work of Christ. What room of interpretation are we left with, when Peter applies the Fourth Servant Song to the suffering of Jesus (2 Peter 2:21–25), when Matthew applies the Fourth and the First Servant Songs respectively to Jesus’ healing ministry (8:17) and his deliberate avoidance of publicity (12:15–21), when both Paul and John appropriates Isaiah 53:1 to describe the hardness

of hearts of the Jewish people (John 12:37–38; Romans 10:16), and when Jesus himself makes unmistakable allusions to various Servant Songs (e.g., Luke 3:22, Mark 14:24, Luke 22:37)?

While a christological reading of the Servant Songs will always remain a fixpoint in our hermeneutical enterprise, adopting an *exclusively* christological reading when we approach 2 Isaiah is a rather dangerous business. Doing so overlooks the historicity of the Isaianic texts, causing the scripture to be uprooted from its historical context (i.e., Babylonian Exile). More significantly, when the Servant Songs degrade into “proof texts” that serve no other purpose than to demonstrate that Jesus’ atoning death is accurately prophesied by the Old Testament, when they become only “food for thoughts,” then these words of God become completely tamed and domesticated, thus ceasing to challenge us to live a life of servanthood in front of the Holy One of Israel.

Yet, there is a second point that is highlighted by the narrative of the Ethiopian eunuch: when an honest reader who has not been introduced to a christological reading of the text, when 2 Isaiah stands on itself, the identity of the servant is ambiguous, and may very well fit multiple personalities. The Ethiopian eunuch mentioned one possibility, the prophet himself, but there appears to be other possibilities. A natural choice would be Israel herself, for she has been referred to as the servant of the Lord throughout Isaiah 40–55. Although none of these actual figures seem to fit very well, the identification of the servant in the Songs now appears not as trivial as we first thought.

I think that any reasonable reading of the Servant Songs must honor the following three principles:

1. The texts are rooted in history, addressed to the specific historical context of Babylonian Exile, and situated in the literary context of 2 Isaiah. A reasonable reading of the Servant Songs must allow the Servant Songs to speak to us as one of the oracles in 2 Isaiah, and not as proof texts uprooted from its historical and literary contexts.
2. The historical church witnessed to the fact that Jesus life and ministry can be understood in terms of the Servant Songs. A reasonable reading of the Servant Songs must allow the coming of Christ to “reveal” a deeper appreciation of the message of the Servant Songs.
3. Being part of the Holy Scripture, the Servant Songs still speak to us today. A reasonable reading of the Servant Song must allow the Spirit to change the hearts and minds of Christians in the 21st century.

In the sequel, we will approach the Servant Songs in the following manner:

- The servant figure is an idealized description of a servant of God, that is why it partially fits Israel or the prophet. The idealization of servanthood speaks to the first audience of 2 Isaiah in their historical context, and dovetails with the literary context of 2 Isaiah.
- Jesus, the servant par excellence of God, took upon himself to live out what Israel failed to do, thereby becoming the true Israel and embodying the ideals of the Servant Songs.
- Christians, who are called to imitate Christ and to become the new Israel, can find in the Servant Songs the nature of our vocation.

I owe this approach to John Goldingay (see References).

In the following, we will attempt to read Isaiah 42:1–9 using this approach. While vv. 1–4 is the First Song, vv. 5–9 elaborate on the same theme. We therefore read the nine verses together.

3 A Light to the Nations

- v. 1: The language used here is that of the presentation of an appointee (e.g., 1 Samuel 9:17). The word “justice” here means judicial order, a integral component of Near East kingship.
- v. 3 strengthens this theme, and asserts the dependability of the outcome (that is what the phrase “in faithfulness” means).
- v. 4 highlights that the scope of the reformation of justice is to be global. It further points out that the gentiles (“islands” probably means the Mediterranean coastline; it stands for gentiles in general) are waiting in anticipation to hear the Law (*tôrâ*) of God.
- v. 6 summarizes the role of the servant as a covenant for humanity and a light for the gentiles.

Reflections: While the suffering Israel is preoccupied with the thought of her being forsaken by God (40:27), the Servant is called to bring justice to the nations. This is a rather surprising vocation under the crushing power of the Babylonian Empire. The task bears continuity with the original vocation of Israel, namely, to be a nation of priesthood through which the blessing of Abraham can reach the world. The justice and torah that is embodied by the Servant and his message will become so attractive that the nations wait in eager anticipation.

As we read this Servant Song we have to wrestle with two challenges. First, what message are we bringing to the world today. The Servant is called to restore justice, to be a covenant for humanity, and to become a light to the nations. Is our church living out such a vocation. Are we preoccupied with our own business? Are we intimidated by the oppressiveness of the empire?

Second, the nations are supposed to be waiting in eager anticipation for the “torah” that is entrusted to us. Do we see such an anticipation today? What has gone wrong? Discipleship, the Christian way of existence, is supposed to be a life-affirming gospel that attracts the world. Do we embody such an attractive gospel?

4 A Gentle Healer

- v. 2: Unlike the Persian king Cyrus, the rising power implicitly predicted in Isaiah 41 and later explicitly in Chs. 44 and 45, the Servant does not come in might and power that draws people’s attention. There is an inherent meekness in the way of the Servant.
- v. 3: When one sees a smoldering wick, one will naturally snuff it out. No one will pay special attention and care to a bruised reed. One naturally steps on it and move on. Yet it is not so with the Servant. To the broken and the weak, the Servant will pay special attention. This is the manner in which justice will be brought to the nations. This is the way in which the Servant becomes a light to the nations.
- v. 7: In more concrete terms, the Servant is to bring light to those who are blind, and liberate those who are imprisoned by darkness.

Reflections: Perhaps this is how the Christian Church should become a light to the nations in the midst of an empire. Maybe this is why the torah can become attractive to the world. This is exactly how our Lord ministered to the people of his time. He did not come as a prince with a line up of servants and guards. Rather, he humbly identified himself with those who are outlawed and despised by the society, with tax collectors and prostitutes, the broken reeds and smoldering wicks of his time. Think of the lepers and the demon-possessed. Think of the tax collectors Levi and Zacchaeus. Think of the sinful woman who wept at Jesus' feet. Think of the Samaritan woman at the well of Jacob. Jesus chose to associate with these people, to gently touch their lives.

Do not underestimate what you see in the life of our Lord. Yes, he was a miracle worker. But people were attracted to him not only because of the miracles. People were genuinely attracted to the Lord because he embodied what the First Servant Song talks about.

How about us? The First Servant Song is not only a prophesy predicting the coming of a gracious servant. It is also a call to servanthood to which our Lord answered. How about us?

5 Final Words

Isaiah 61:1–2 is a passage that contains language with striking similarities to the Servant Songs:

*The spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn.*

According to the Gospel of Luke, our Lord chose to use this passage to inaugurate his public ministry. Will this also be a summary of our church's mission to the world?